DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 078 383 CS 000 607

AUTHOR Mathewson, Grover C.
TITLE Children's Responses to Reading and Hearing Standard English and Nonstandard Dialect Stories: A Study of Evaluation and Comprehension.
PUB DATE Mar 73
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Assn. (New Orleans, February 25-March 1, 1973)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Dialects; *Dialect Studies; Elementary Grades; Grade 3; *Listening Comprehension; *Negro Dialects; Nonstandard Dialects; Reading; *Reading Comprehension; Reading Interests; Reading Materials; *Reading Research; Reading Skills

ABSTRACT

Two studies are discussed in this research report, which was presented at the 1973 American Educational Research Association meeting. The first study investigated whether black children would evaluate Black English selections more favorably than standard English selections and whether favorable evaluation would lead to greater comprehension of the Black English selections. The subjects, 24 black and 24 white third grade students, used a seven-point semantic differential type scale to rate the stories. The results of the experiment showed that the black children rated the Black English materials as worse, less correct, and harder to read than the Standard English materials. The second study was conducted in the same manner as the first, but an auditory dimension was added by playing the stories on a tape recorder. The stories were folk tales, and two more dialects were added, pidgin from Hawaii and Cajun from Louisiana. The findings indicated: (1) black children think that listening to the Black English story versions is better and more beautiful than white children do; (2) black children's comprehension of the Black English versions is better than their comprehension of stories in the other dialects; and (3) there was no difference between black and white children in their comprehension of spoken Standard English stories. (WR)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH EDUCATION & WELFARE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

SCOPE OF INTEREST NOTICE
The ERIC Facility has assigned this document for processing to: CS PS
In our judgement, this document is also of interest to the clearinghouses noted to the right. Indexing should reflect their special points of view. UD

AERA: March 1, 1973

Children's Responses to Reading and Hearing Standard English and Nonstandard Dialect Stories. A Study of Evaluation and Comprehension

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Grover C. Mathewson
TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER

Grover C. Mathewson

University of California, Berkeley

ED 018383

The best research begins with theory. A theoretical structure guides what hypotheses will be tested and how the data will be interpreted. So it is intended in the following research into children's reading of dialect. This research began with the development of a theoretical model. The model, in turn, generated specific predictions concerning what might be expected when Black children read stories in their own dialect. It is thus necessary to start with a description of the theoretical model before the experimentation itself is presented.

The model used in this study appears in Figure 1 below. The model was developed to structure the affective component in Ruddell's systems of communication model (1970). For convenience, the diagram in Figure 1 has been labeled the acceptance model. This name was given to it because it predicts that comprehension and attention are maintained in reading only when a favorable attitude toward reading material exists. The child must therefore affectively accept what he reads if his reading is to continue. At this point it will be useful to trace through the acceptance model to determine how it works.

Basic to the operation of the model is the motivational component. This component provides the attentional and comprehension processes with generalized drive to maintain their activity. The motivations proposed here are activity, achievement, curiousity, and self-actualization. Any of these motivations could initiate the reading process if the next component

CS 000 607

FILMED FROM BEST AVAILABLE COPY

of the model, the relevant attitude toward reading, were favorable. The relevant attitude toward reading is that attitude which is effective as a child considers reading materials. The attitude may direct the hitherto undirected motivations into the reading activity. It may also, however, direct the child's attention away from reading if the child's attitude is unfavorable. This component thus provides directional guidance toward or away from reading.

The next two components of the model are the attentional and comprehension components. Though these two processes may be very difficult to tease apart experimentally, there is theoretical justification for believing that they are different. The attentional processes may be brought into play even though the child does not possess sufficient competence to comprehend what he is beginning to read. Conversely, a child may be able to comprehend a passage quite well, but if he does not pay attention to it, his comprehension processes will not be brought into play.

Insert Figure 1 about here

The last component in the model is the acceptance process. Here the meaning output of the comprehension processes is compared with prior values, attitude, and beliefs. If there is a match between prior attitudes and the newly decoded meaning, the child's attitude toward the reading selection will be favorably modified. This is indicated by the extreme right-hand arrow in Figure 1. If, however, the meaning output is absent or does not conform to prior attitudes, then the relevant attitude component will be unfavorably modified. This will lead to attention being diverted from the reading materials and comprehension being rendered less effective.

In summary, motivation and attitude determine initial attention and comprehension. The meaning of what is comprehended is then accepted or rejected. This acceptance or rejection modifies the effective attitude

toward the reading materials, which again affects attention and comprehension. This model should be visualized as operating constantly as the person reads. At each moment, the person's changing attitude toward the linguistic form, content, and format of presentation determines whether he will stop reading or continue.

There are studies in the literature which support the acceptance model. Studies by Bernstein (1955), Groff (1962), Healy (1963, 1965), and Shnayer (1969) confirm the effect of attitude on comprehension. The support for the model in the literature was encouraging, but it indicated that more needed to be done. It seemed desirable not only to do more experimentation designed to test the model, but to use the model as justification for identifying those reading materials that children enjoy. Identification of favorably predisposing reading materials would consequently show what materials would ensure the greatest attention and comprehension.

The first task was to find an aspect of reading materials would be expected to elicit favorable attitudes from a group or sub-group of children. The aspect chosen was dialect. It was expected that children would react favorably to reading materials in a dialect from their own culture. Black English was chosen as the dialect to use in the experiment. The specific expectation was that Black children would prefer to read stories in Black English. This was expected because Black English is a language form that Black children's friends, acquaintances, and relatives speak. The acceptance theory prediction following from this favorable attitude toward Black English was that children would comprehend Black English stories better than those in standard English.

The prediction was tested using both Black children and White children. If the prediction were substantiated, the Black children should evaluate Black English selections more favorably than standard English selections. This favorable evaluation should lead to greater comprehension of the Black English selections. White children could be used as a control group. There would be no reason to expect that they would have much Black English

in their cultural heritage. It would therefore be expected that the White children's evaluation and comprehension of dialect selections would be lower than that of Black children.

The subjects used in the experiment were 48 third grade children. 24 were Black and 24 were White. The children were tested at an elementary school in Berkeley, California. They were seated one by one in an experimental room and shown how to use a large 7-point semantic differential type scale mounted on a board. The children were asked to place a small doll along the scale at a point indicating their attitudes toward each story. Three successive polar opposites were used on the scale. They were good-bad, correct-wrong, and hard-easy. A training task was used to insure that each child knew how to work the scale.

After learning how to use the scale, the children were presented with three stories from the experimental reading texts of Baratz (1970). One of the stories was in Black English and the other was in standard English. The order of presentation for the stories and their assignment to Black English or standard English was balanced within the experimental design.

Table 1 below gives the means and standard deviations for the ratings of the stories. The results of the experiment show that instead of rating Black English reading materials higher than standard English, the Black children rated them as worse, less correct, and harder to read. A multivariate analysis of variance run on the data showed that this result was significant at the .001 level, 2-tail.

Insert Table 1 about here.

These unexpected results were explained by two further pieces of evidence. First, the Black and the White children, both of whom had learned to read in standard English, rated Black English as harder to read

than standard English. Second, the results of the story retell showed that significantly less was recalled from the dialect stories, especially from the conflict points. Third, an interview at the end of the experiment showed that only 9 of the 48 children recognized the dialect form of the stories as the language of Black people. Together, these pieces of evidence indicate that the Balck English stories were rated lower because the children experienced much difficulty in decoding them from print. Had the children recognized the dialect form as Black English with much accuracy, then other arguments would have been possible. In the present case, the children saw the dialect form only as difficult and deviant. Removal of the children recognizing the dialect form as Black English did not change the results of the statistical analysis. Thus both Black and White children disliked reading the dialect form because it was too hard for them to decode.

The results of this first experiment can only be taken to mean that dialect reading materials should not be presented to elementary school children who have learned to read with standard English. The hypothesis drawn from the model was not really tested in this study because sucessful decoding of dialect forms was a necessary element, and this was absent.

Though the hypothesis drawn from the acceptance model was not tested, the model could still be used to explain what happened. The acceptance model predicts that the acceptance of a set of reading materials is dependent upon the output of the comprehension process. If this output is disrupted, then the attitudes toward the reading materials would be modified in an unfavorable direction. This would be expected because there would be no meaning to correspond favorably with prior attitudes, beliefs, and values. Apparently this is what happened when the third graders tried to read the dialect stories.

The findings up to this point are interesting from a practical and an acceptance theory point of view, but it is always unsatisfying to leave an experiment at such an incomplete stage. The original hypothesis was that Black children would prefer stories in Black English because this language form was part of their cultural heritage. However, the children's inability to

decode printed Black English forms disrupted testing of the hypothesis. This finding suggests that another mode of presentation other than reading is necessary to test the hypothesis. A prerequisite for this is a generalization of the hypothesis derived from the acceptance model to another sensory channel. This indeed is possible in the case of listening. The acceptance model presented in Figure 1 deals only with reading, but the more general model specifies the same relationships between attitude, attention, and comprehension for listening as it does for reading. Consequently the same hypothesis advanced for reading Black English can be tested employing listening instead. Children's listening to dialect stories would avoid the problems in reading because the children would only have to decode the meaning from the auditory stimulus. They would not have to go through the additional stages necessary in decoding from print.

The suggestion of using auditory rather than written dialect stories was only the first of several ideas suggested by the initial study. In addition, the debriefing interviews at the end of the experiment revealed that some children wished that they could hear the dialect language form. They firmly indicated that they did not like reading dialect. If these children's wishes were followed, it would seem to be a good idea to find ways of presenting dialect stories so that they would be enjoyable to all children, not only to those whose culture included that dialect. The second study was therefore designed with both these questions in mind. First, the hypothesis that went untested in the first experiment would be tested in the second experiment using spoken stories instead of written ones. Second, the written stories would be designed so that all children, regardless of ethnic group membership, would enjoy the stories. From a curriculum point of view, this seemed to be a good idea because the possibility that children would enjoy spoken dialect stories would indicate how cultural pluralism in language could be introduced into the classroom.

The second study therefore had two separate hypotheses: the one remaining to be tested from the first study and a new hypothesis suggesting that spoken dialect in an appropriate story context would be enjoyable to

all children. The story contexts chosen for the second study were folk tales. It was supposed that these stories would provide appropriate matrices for the dialect language forms. In addition, two more dialects were added in order to more fully test the second hypothesis. These were Pidgin from Hawaii and Cajun from Louisiana. These additions were made so that the reactions of all children to a variety of dialects, not just one, could be assessed. The difference between the reactions of Black children to Black English and to other nonstandard dialects could also be assessed with these additions.

The second experiment was conducted in the same way as the first, but the auditory dimension was added by playing the stories on a tape recorder in the listening conditions. The dialect tapes were recorded by speakers whose background allowed them to read in standard English and dialect guises. On the basis of testing twenty-four third grade children, the following significant findings have emerged:

1. Black children think that listening to the Black English story versions is better and more beautiful than White children do.
2. Black children's listening comprehension for the Black English versions is better than for the other dialects or for the standard English versions.
3. Black children comprehend the spoken Black English versions better than the White children do.
4. There was no difference between Black and White children in their comprehension of spoken standard English stories.

These results support the initial hypothesis that Black children prefer Black English stories. They also confirm the acceptance theory hypothesis that stories in Black English would consequently be comprehended better than standard English versions. All of these hypotheses were true for listening, but not for reading.

The second hypothesis, that oral folk stories would be a good way to

present the various dialects of English to all children, was not supported. Attitudes toward the dialect versions were lower and the spoken dialect stories were comprehended less well than those in standard English. This may indicate that some other training procedure in dialect is desirable before children are exposed to stories in dialect.

The research into the evaluation and comprehension of dialects is continuing. Hopefully the results will be both of theoretical interest and of use to those concerned with language curriculum.

References

Baratz, J. Friends. Washington, D.C.: Education Study Center, 1970.

Baratz, J. Ollie. Washington, D.C.: Education Study Center, 1970.

Bernstein, M. R. Relationship between interest and reading comprehension. Journal of Educational Research, 1955, 283 - 288.

Groff, P. J. Children's attitudes toward reading and their critical reading abilities in four content-type materials. The Journal of Educational Research, 1962, 313 - 317.

Healy, A. K. Changing children's attitudes toward reading. Elementary English, 1963, 255 - 259, 279.

Healy, A. K. Effects of changing children's attitudes toward reading. Elementary English, 1965, 269 - 272.

Ruddell, R. B. Psycholinguistic implications for a systems of communications model. In H. Singer and R. B. Ruddell (Eds.) Theoretical Models and Processes of Reading. Neward, Delaware: International Reading Association, 1970.

Shnayer, S. W. Relationships between reading interest and reading comprehension. Reading and Realism, 1969, 698 - 702.

Table I

		Black Children			White Children*		
		Good-Bad	Correct-Wrong	Hard-Easy	Good-Bad	Correct-Wrong	Hard-Easy **
Standard English Selection	mean	4.71	5.38	4.29	3.75	4.92	5.92
	SD	2.60	2.18	2.63	1.77	1.64	1.53
Black English Selection	mean	2.83	2.62	2.79	2.71	2.67	3.67
	SD	2.42	2.24	2.00	1.52	1.68	2.08

*24 children were in each group.

**The greater the number, the more favorable the rating. The adjectives are semantic differential type rating scale poles.

THE ACCEPTANCE MODEL: A MODEL OF ATTITUDE FORMATION AND CHANGE IN READING

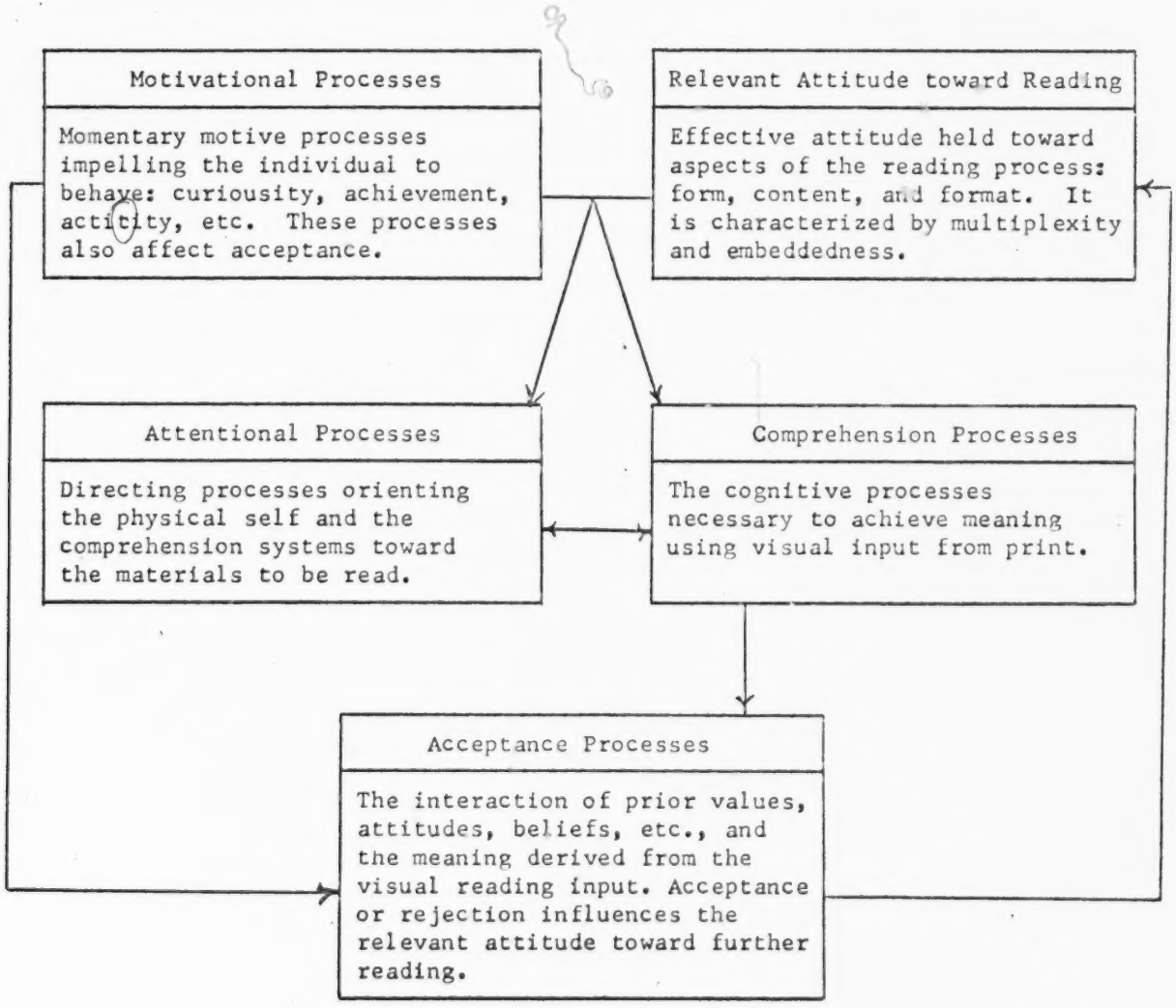
Motivational Processes
Momentary motive processes impelling the individual to behave: curiousity, achievement, actitity, etc. These processes also affect acceptance.
Relevant Attitude toward Reading
Effective attitude held toward aspects of the reading process: form, content, and format. It is characterized by multiplexity and embeddedness.
Attentional Processes
Directing processes orienting the physical self and the comprehension systems toward the materials to be read.
Comprehension Processes
The cognitive processes necessary to achieve meaning using visual input from print.
Acceptance Processes
The interaction of prior values, attitudes, beliefs, etc., and the meaning derived from the visual reading input. Acceptance or rejection influences the relevant attitude toward further reading.

FIGURE 1